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ABSTRACT

Through observational studies of 15 preschool and 15 public school first grade classrooms in Tokyo, Japan, an initial understanding of social control through education is presented. While Japanese preschool children are indulged and undisciplined by their parents, evidence suggests that Japanese school children are more attentive and spend less time in inappropriate behavior than their U.S. counterparts. Socialization learned through peer relationships appears to be the goal of preschool and primary education. Children share visibly and extensively in classroom management through a rotated peer monitor system that controls peers' behavior. Children are assigned to small groups based on complementary abilities, not on equal abilities, for work and play. Meanwhile teachers maintain a low to invisible profile in classroom discipline and do not enforce behavior limits. Peer relationships are stressed as the most important attitude for children to learn. (DJC)

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SOCIAL CONTROL: A VIEW FROM THE JAPANESE KINDERGARTEN AND FIRST GRADE

by

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Social Control: A View from the Japanese Kindergarten and First Grade

I became interested in the topic of social control in education because of a paradox that has probably struck many of you who have lived in Japan. It is the seemingly dramatic difference in the behavior expected of children during the early years of life, in contrast with school-age children. Ethnographic accounts suggest that, during the preschool years, Japanese parents try to cultivate harmonious relationships with their children by indulging children's desires whenever possible, avoiding confrontation or punishment, and even avoiding setting clear rules or limits for children. Despite this early indulgence, studies of Japanese elementary schools reveal orderly classrooms where as many as 45 students share one teacher, and where subordination of personal needs to group goals is the dominant norm. Cross-national research indicates that Japanese elementary school students, in comparison to their U.S. counterparts, are more attentive and spend less time in inappropriate behavior. How do indulged and undisciplined toddlers become attentive, well-disciplined schoolchildren? I would like to discuss this transition, drawing on my own observational studies of 15 Japanese preschools (yochien) from Tokyo and other areas and 15 Tokyo public-school first-grade classrooms. Schools in each sample were selected to be as diverse as possible. They should not be construed to be representative of all Japanese preschools and first grades. In Japan, as in the U.S., assembling an observational sample representative of all schools in the country would be an herculean task. In the preschool study, classes for 5-year-olds were observed.

For most Japanese children, preschool -- either yochien or hoikuen is the transition between home and school. Forty percent of 3-year-olds and 92% of all 4- and 5- year-olds are in child care or preschool (that is, hoiku-en or yochien) in Japan. There is little difference in the programmatic content of yochien and hoikuen for 3-5 year-olds. I approached the study of Japanese preschools with the notion that perhaps the boom is suddenly lowered when children enter an organized setting, and the indulgence of early home life gives way to strictness and regimentation. What I found was something quite different. I would like to describe the major strategies Japanese preschool teachers use to manage children's behavior.

Surprisingly, one of the most striking aspects of Japanese preschool life is the low profile of teachers as authority figures. In most cases, a single teacher, with no adult helpers, was responsible for 30-40 children. In only half of the spot observations I conducted were all of the children even within an adult's sight; in 13% of the spot observations, none of the children were within an adult's sight. Whether teachers were absent or present, a tremendouly wide range of behavior was tolerated, including very boisterous behavior, high noise levels, and much running both inside and outside the classroom. When teachers did see an activity they considered inappropriate or dangerous, they generally did not force children to desist. For example, a teacher might say something like "if you keep throwing sand, you could hurt each other's eyes" but would not directly tell children to stop nor monitor to see whether the children actually did stop.

On the face of it, the reluctance of Japanese teachers to set and enforce clear limits on children's behavior seems to fly in the face of much

conventional wisdom in the U.S. that children behave best when rules are clear and consistently enforced. However, the Japanese practices have an interesting fit with what U.S. researchers call "attribution theory." Attribution theory suggests that children who obey a rule without salient external pressure to do so are much more likely to internalize the rule in question than children who obey but can attribute their behavior to external pressure, such as an adult who will punish or reprimand them. In this view, the trick of effective socialization is to get children to obey without creating circumstances in which they can attribute their obedience to some external pressure, such as surveillance by an adult or threat of punishment. Obviously, the low visibility of adults as authority figures in the Japanese preschool makes it hard for children to attribute their behavior to adult surveillance and intervention.

A second striking aspect of the control strategies used in Japanese preschools is the emphasis on children's regulation of their own behavior and that of peers. For example, a teacher who sees two Japanese 5-year-olds locked in combat, pulling each other's hair and crying, may be more likely to suggest to onlooking children that they try to find out what's wrong than to intervene herself. My observations, as well as those of other researchers, suggest that activities such as calling together class members for lunch, checking lunchboxes before children may go out for recess, and even managing aggression may be the responsibility of the preschool children, rather than the teacher. To the extent that an individual child successfully regulates his or her own behavior, without intervention from the teacher, the child may be learning self-regulation skills, and also building a self-concept as a child who can regulate his or her own behavior at school, without direct adult

guidance.

Small, fixed-membership groups of children were a prominent feature of preschool life in 13 of the 15 schools I studied. Typically these groups included six to eight children who stayed together for one or even as long as two years. Groups had their own tables and were frequently the units for chores, lunch, teacher-initiated projects, and children's own informal play. Teachers devised imaginative activities to help build cooperative skills among the members of these groups. For example, the groups made collaborative murals for which it was necessary to share materials, and cooperative picture stories for which group members had to confer and negotiate in order to come up with a coherent plot. Children seemed to become very skilled in recognizing the needs and feelings of others in their group. And their fates were linked in many ways. For example, a group with an unruly member might keep knocking over the paint needed for the group mural. Inevitably, then, these small groups became units in which children learned to shape one another's behavior. What are the psychological consequences for a child of having behavior regulated by other children, rather than by an adult? For example, some children were told by other children that they had to finish lunch before going outside to play; one child responsible for obtaining snacks was hit on the back by hungry classmates when he became distracted from his task. What is the impact of being cautioned, prodded, or even punished by peers, rather than by an adult? While there is little evidence on this issue, I think several possibilities need further investigation. First, peer consequences may seem much more like the natural consequences of acts than do adult sanctions, and this may facilitate children's internalization of the desired behavior. Second, when peers have the responsibility for monitoring and enforcement, teachers can remain more

benevolent, and adult authority in general may acquire a more benevolent cast. Third, negative sanctions from peers may present less of a threat to children's identity as "good children" than do sanctions by adults. To a 5-year-old child, criticism from an adult can be a crushing blow to self-esteem and to the sense of oneself as a good child.

A third striking aspect of management in Japanese preschools is that children are given plentiful opportunities to act as authority figures. Fourteen of the 15 preschools I observed had a formal system of daily rotating toban, or monitors. All children became toban according to a fixed rotation; merit and personal qualities did not figure in selection. The toban had a highly visible role as classroom authority figures; they might lead the class in greetings, decide which group to dismiss first, and give permission to individual children to go outside after lunch. The daily announcement of the new toban was often conducted with great pomp and ceremony. In one classroom, the two new toban received Olympic-style necklace medals to the accompaniment of recorded trumpet music. In addition to the formal toban system, children had extensive other involvement as classroom authorities. For example, they formulated and enforced rules for classroom behavior, were responsible for caring for class property and animals, and had class meetings to make decisions about class events.

A fourth interesting aspect of Japanese preschool teachers' management style was that teachers tended to attribute children's misbehavior to benign causes. Children did not "disobey" the rules; they had "forgotten" them. Children's poor understanding, not deliberate wrongdoing, accounted for inappropriate behavior. In this context, it may be very hard for Japanese

preschoolers to develop an identity as "bad" children.

Before going on to talk about my observations of first-grade classrooms, I'd like to recount one incident that illustrates a number of the themes I have discussed. A number of boys were fashioning clay bombs and dropping them on the class's goldfish. The teacher explained to the boys that they could hurt the fish, but did not specifically tell the boys to stop (nor did they). The teacher discussed the incident with the whole class at the end of the school day, explaining that some boys thought they were helping the class by throwing in clay that looked like food, but that the boys were actually harming the fish. The teacher suggested that the class should notice whether everyone was treating class pets well. When I subsequently interviewed the teacher, our exchange was as follows:

Int.: Did you really think the children were trying to help the fish by throwing in the clay pellets?

Teacher: Yes

Int.: Don't you think the boys understood they might hurt the fish by throwing the clay pellets?

Teacher: If they understood it was wrong, they wouldn't do it.

The teacher's failure to demand or enforce obedience, her involvement of the whole class in the management of the incident, and her unwillingness to attribute bad motives to the boys illustrate the socialization strategies

discussed above.

By the techniques I have discussed, preschool teachers work to build in children the skills and motivation to cooperate with one another and with classroom norms. However, Japanese preschools are still strikingly noisy, child-centered places, where extremely boisterous behavior is tolerated, and where, recent cross-national research documents, Japanese children spend twice as much time in free activities and one third as much time in academic activities as their American counterparts of the same age. How does this change when children reach first grade? I would like to briefly summarize some of the classroom management strategies evident in first-grade classrooms, based on my observations of 15 classrooms in 13 Tokyo elementary schools.

Once again, small groups were a prominent feature of classroom life. All of the 15 classrooms had fixed groups of 4-8 children whose desks were nearby each other. These fixed groups, called han, served as units for many academic as well as nonacademic activities: everything from eating lunch to conducting science experiments. Groups were frequently treated as units when teachers or students evaluated performance. For example, in their report to the class at the end of the day, monitors in one first-grade class reported, "Groups 1 and 4 were ready to begin every lesson today, but Groups 2 and 3 need to try harder." How were these groups formed? No teachers reported that they grouped children of similar ability level together. In fact, teachers reported just the opposite strategy: they spread across groups the academically most able children and tried to put in each group children with certain personality characteristics. So, for example, they tried to assure that each shy child would be in a group with a nurturant child, that a slow learner would be near a

fast learner, and so forth. As one teacher reported: "A good group is one that works together well." Teachers saw these small groups as key structures for helping the classroom run smoothly, helping each child to form friendships, and helping the class to initiate new activities with a minimum of disruption.

In the first grades, as in the preschools, children were very visibly and extensively involved in classroom management. Monitors had responsibility for such roles as picking which group showed the best order, cautioning groups to improve their posture, or choosing which group could receive lunch first. Once again, all children became monitors in turn. Children called the class to order, announced the subject to be studied, and introduced the teacher, who was more like an invited specialist, in Lois Peak's phrase, than a person responsible for managing the class's behavior. Helping children achieve self-management appeared to be an important goal for teachers. For example, one teacher described an incident in which it had taken the monitors 17 minutes to quiet the class for morning greetings, and said: "I could have quieted the children myself by saying one word, but I did not intervene, because the class needs to learn how to manage itself." Children were also involved in evaluation of each other's academic work. For example, in 6 of 15 classrooms children clapped for each other, often in response to some comment from the teacher, such as "What do we do when someone reads to us in a nice loud voice?". Self-criticism and self-reflection were also prominent parts of the curriculum. For example, during weekly class meetings, teachers might ask children to reflect on something particularly nice or particularly naughty they had done during the previous week. In many classrooms, children had identified goals for themselves -- everything from "stop punching my little sister" to "try to

learn more Chinese characters" -- and each week they thought about their progress toward their goal, and perhaps discussed it with classmates.

Like preschool teachers, first grade teachers saw children as important managers of each other's behavior. For example, I asked one first-grade teacher why she had watched a child push another child to the ground during an athletics festival practice without intervening. She said: the child was pushed down because she wasn't dancing seriously. It's the classmates, not me, that are being inconvenienced by the child's behavior. I was surprised that one teacher had the whole class applaud the vocabulary answer of a child who, only minutes earlier, had been shouting obscenities and severely disrupting the class. When I later questioned her about this strategy, she said that she tried to find something to praise him for each day, to keep his classmates from giving up on him. She went on to explain that it was friendships, not academic activities, that motivated children to come to school. Her sentiments were echoed by the majority of teachers who mentioned some aspect of friendship or peer relations as the most important skill, attitude, or behavior that children needed to learn during the first month of first grade.

Much more research needs to be done on the process by which Japanese children move from what has been described as indulgence in the home to the seemingly miraculously smooth self-management and self-discipline of the school setting. My research, and that of Lois Peak, Joe Tobin, Joy Hendry, and others has been limited to a small number of settings. Although an excellent start has been made in the cross-national research of Stevenson and colleagues, cross-cultural research is also urgently needed. However, I would like to advance several very tentative hypotheses about the ways in which the preschool

and early elementary school experience in Japan fosters children's willingness to adhere to important social norms.

First, young children are given every opportunity to see themselves as good, responsible persons who are part of the authority structure, and few opportunities to see themselves as bad. Even bombing goldfish and shouting obscenities is likely to elicit patient explanations and redoubled attempts to foster peer friendships. Second, small, enduring groups provide a home-base to learn about the needs and feelings of others, and to learn the skills needed to collaborate smoothly as a group, and by extension, to allow the whole classroom to function smoothly as a collection of groups. Third, peers are important agents of socialization; great attention is given to making the relationships between children positive and supportive. Teachers rarely have to exercise authority directly, and thus may be able to remain benevolent authorities. Fourth, emphasis on children's socioemotional needs is pronounced in both preschool and first grade in Japan; major goals pertain to social integration and social support, not academic achievement.

There is much we need to know about Japanese early education and its relationship with later education and socialization. I would like to close by mentioning a few of the issues on which further information is needed. First, what are the continuities and discontinuities between early education and later education? To what extent do disciplinary practices change as children grow older? To what extent do early practices result in such a high degree of internalization that teachers can reduce the amount of time spent in classroom management as children grow older? Second, do Japanese classroom management approaches have an impact on creativity, or on willingness to express divergent

opinions? Third, how much variation is there in child rearing and early education across geographical regions and across institutions in Japan? Our data are at this time very limited. Ethnographies of schools in smaller communities in Japan, such as the work conducted by Hendry, do in some cases suggest geographic differences within Japan. Finally, how can the gap be bridged from the current qualitative narrative observations of educational pratices to studies which allow us to summarize across classrooms and across cultures, and to identify practices which might be effective in other settings?